

Jewish Meditation

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In my youth the Beatles, notably George Harrison, introduced us to Transcendental Meditation and a variety of other Eastern religious practices. Yoga had been popular long before, of course, so had Rabindranath Tagore, whom my father read. If the practices were completely devoid of any outside religio-cultural association, there was no problem in trying them out, any more than fitness training might create a conflict of interest with Judaism, which of course it did not.

I gave yoga a shot for a while, but soon lost interest. Later on I read the books that the late and much lamented Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan wrote on meditation in Judaism. I would close my eyes, imagine a selected letter of the Hebrew alphabet and focus on that letter for as long as I could. That then gave way to concentrating on what looked like black and white clouds that I would "see" as I closed my eyes. At the very least, it relaxed me more often than not. Sometimes it transported me into a different world in which I felt myself to have gone beyond my own body and into the "spiritual". This became a daily habit, before I started my morning prayers and at various other times during a day as the opportunity arose.

When the Talmud (Brachot 32b) said that "the early pious ones use to wait an hour in preparation before they started to pray," this was precisely what they must have been doing, meditating to get in the mood. I studied medieval mystics like Abraham Abulafia and saw that they were practicing various forms of mystical meditation; I realized that meditation had for a long time been part of our own Jewish tradition. Many of the greatest rabbis and Chasidic masters used these meditations in their different ways. It was a tool, to prepare for prayer, to make prayer itself more personal and meaningful, and to enhance the spiritual side of their religious lives.

You may well wonder, if this is so, why there has been a conspiracy of silence in much of the Orthodox world for so long. I believe it is, in part, a reaction against the excesses and abuses of Kabbalah in the past, men like Shabbetai Zvi and Jacob Frank. In addition in post-Enlightenment Europe at any rate, the rise of rationalism tended to mock mysticism. Nowadays there is a return towards this other aspect of Jewish religious experience precisely because we know too well the limitations of science (as well, of course, as its benefits).

On many occasions during my teaching life, I have given courses on meditation in Judaism and on practices popular in the Kabbalah, not as ends in themselves but as means to fuller Jewish spiritual life. So for me all of this is nothing new. It is an essential part of my Judaism and has been for most of my life.

Now The Economist has discovered it (November 16th). Meditation is all the rage in cyberspace it seems and what's more "it is keeping capitalism alive."

The article makes some interesting assertions. "Buddhism stresses the importance of 'mindfulness'." Indeed, but so does Judaism, and without the need to reject materialism either. This is the reason for blessings in our ritual, to think and consider before one acts. "Taking time out from the hurly burley of daily activities." Isn't that what Shabbat, festivals, and indeed daily prayer are designed to do? Judaism has always tried to combine being part of the ordinary material world while yet preserving the alternative spiritual counterbalance. Not going overboard in either direction—Maimonides's Golden Rule.

Now all of a sudden this "mindfulness" stripped of its original ascetic dimension is the fashion, and everyone is trying it. Something that has always been part of our tradition is now suddenly taken up by Google, eBay, Twitter, and Facebook. They all advocate meditation in general, as well as offering courses within the company. And hey, presto, it becomes kosher!

But the article goes on to say, "The biggest problem with mindfulness is that it is becoming part of the self-help movement and hence part of the disease that it is supposed to cure." That is precisely the problem that we have seen. The hijacking of Kabbalah from an intense supra layer over a framework of religious daily practice, to a popular quick fix with minimal commitment or religious investment, a Hollywood fad.

That is the modern way. But it is doomed to mediocrity, as any popular movement is as its shine wears off. History has taught us (so has Malcolm Gladwell, distilling the wisdom of others) that only intense involvement in any subject or sphere brings mastery. So it is with religion. As the world suddenly discovers what we have known for millennia. Sadly, too many in our tradition treat religion as a social phenomenon or a means of social control. It is stripped of its deeper meaning and spiritual heights and replaced with ugliness, materialism, and banality. In furniture, music, and clothes we either glorify kitsch or bathos. I look around me and I do not like what I see. But when I return to the actual content of Torah and its mystical depth, I thank the Almighty for our heritage. "Thanksgiving" in the USA is once a year. For me it is every day.